

Professional Learning Communities, Principals, and Collegial Conversations

by Gene Spanneut



"By weighing their shared experiences, beliefs, and knowledge, professional learning communities can begin to consider, develop, implement, and assess instructional improvement strategies tailored to their schools' specific needs."

Nearly 30 years ago, Ron Edmonds (1982) identified the instructional leadership of principals as one of the characteristics of effective schools. The connections between what principals do as instructional leaders and the successes of their schools continue to be well recognized (Darling-Hammond et al. 2007). Principals who comprehend the significance of these linkages,

however, realize they cannot provide all the leadership necessary for their schools to work toward maximizing instructional potentials and outcomes. They not only appreciate the importance of soliciting teacher input and involvement in that regard, but they also actively foster the development of their teachers as leaders.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been recognized and

used as viable means for consciously placing curricula, teaching, learn-

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ing, and achievement at the center of schools (Servais, Sanders, and Der-rington 2009). When PLCs are focused on those elements (Green 2010, 156–57),

there is an air of professionalism among all teachers as they partici-pate on effective learning teams and share basic norms and values rela-tive to students, . . . as well as teach-ing and learning. They participate in reflective dialogue about instruction-al challenges and work cooperatively to identify teaching strategies that positively address them.

While the essential words in that passage refer to communication among teachers, principals have op-portunities to play key roles in estab-lishing the conditions within which PLCs can flourish. They can do this by creating the time for such dialogue to occur; they can enhance its effective-ness by purposefully developing and then supporting teachers' use of col-legial conversations within PLCs.

Open Sharing

This mode, one of open sharing among principals and teachers rather than supervisory discourse from prin-cipals to teachers (VanAlstine 2008), is essential for two reasons. First, it promotes the growth of trust among the members of the PLCs (Matthews and Crow 2010, 45):

When teachers trust each other, they share more, they help one another more, and they are more supportive of one another. Likewise, when teachers trust ad-ministrators, they feel less threat-ened and more likely to take risks in creating learning opportunities. With trust, building communities will more likely occur.

Second, based on that trust, collegial conversations become the means through which teachers develop

mutual understandings (Prestridge 2009). Open sharing among teachers, though, should be continuous rather than occasional. Ideally, as members of PLCs, teachers should be provided with time to meet during the school day and throughout the school year (DuFour 2004). Such ongoing conver-sations not only should lead to teach-ers' increased content and pedagogi-cal knowledge, but also can serve to increase teachers' morale (Matthews and Crow 2010).

Together, trust and ongoing col-legial dialogue become integral to what PLCs should accomplish (Servage 2008):

- the identification of shared instruc-tional beliefs and values;
- the formation of mutual under-standings about the areas in which instructional improvements are needed; and
- the development of shared agree-ments about and the implementa-tion of professional development activities required to improve the quality of their schools' instruc-tional programs and products.

Sustained open sharing, knowledge gains, and PLC accomplishments may provide other outcomes for teachers as well. For example, teachers may see opportunities for changes in their roles and responsibilities as they progress from being individual teachers, to be-coming members of functioning teams, to becoming teams of in-house experts.

Developing Skills

Principals, by position, can allocate time for and take steps to encour-age collegial conversations. They also should initiate and facilitate PLC members in their preliminary discus-sions. This approach is not intended, however, as a means for principals to steer the directions of PLCs. Rather, by sharing with teachers, principals can model the uses and the benefits of effective communication and decision-

making skills (Hord and Hirsh 2009). Providing opportunities for teachers to develop these key skills will promote and strengthen their abilities to work collaboratively within their PLCs.

As a focal point for initial collegial conversations, principals can examine within PLCs the ranges of instructional beliefs held by teachers about sets of organizational factors in their schools that directly affect instruction. Topics that could be part of these conver-sations include school culture, the perceived core business of schools, principal leadership, teacher leadership, and leadership style.

To initiate dialogue, principals can introduce a topic and then pro-vide examples of how literature and research can be used to investigate it. With respect to school culture, for example, principals could encourage the exchange of ideas by first identify-ing what researchers and practitioners, such as Deal and Peterson (1999) and Beaudoin and Taylor (2004), offered about recognizing the components of school culture. Then, the exchange of ideas could move to discussing teach-ers' understandings of the impacts those components have on school personnel, leadership, instruction, and achievement.

Next, principals can demonstrate how to use the gained information to pose specific questions of inter-est about their schools—for example, "How can we assess and describe the culture in our school?" and "What are the relationships among our school's personnel, culture, leadership, in-struction, and achievement?" This juncture provides principals with ideal opportunities to model how effective communication and decision-making skills can enhance teachers' work as teams and strengthen their mutual understandings of the results of their decisions. Principals also can empha-size how those skills may be applied for interpreting and discussing the



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answers to their questions as well as for reaching agreement about ways to use information to make deliberate instructional improvements in their schools.

Identifying Resources

To facilitate thoughtful and constructive dialogue, it is important to identify and employ a variety of resources. For instance, the following resources may be helpful for obtaining information and then designing and answering specific questions about discussion topics mentioned previously:

- **Core business.** Examine the works of educators who describe innovative approaches to understanding what schools are and what they can become, such as *Creating Great Schools: Six Critical Systems at the Heart of Educational Innovation* (Schlechty 2005).
- **Principal leadership.** Review examples of how principals have developed and supported teachers as leaders, such as *Lead with Me: A Principal's Guide to Teacher Leadership* (Moller and Pankake 2006) and "Facilitating Elementary Principals' Support for Instructional Teacher Leadership" (Mangin 2007).
- **Teacher leadership.** Explore research, practices, and discussions about teachers' leadership roles, such as "The Nature of Teacher Leadership in Schools as Reciprocal Influences between Teacher Leaders and Principals" (Anderson 2004); *Teacher Leadership* (Lieberman and Miller 2004); "Distributed Leadership" (Spillane 2005); and *Developing Teacher Leaders: How Teacher Leadership Enhances School Success* (Crowther, Ferguson, and Hann 2009).

- **Leadership styles.** Identify and analyze the qualities, abilities, and ranges of leadership styles. Knowing how to ascertain this information and understanding how the mix of personal ingredients influences relationships and operations within the school are equally important. For example, the results obtained from self-assessments, such as *Finding Your Leadership Style: A Guide for Educators* (Glanz 2002), provide insights for personal reflection.

In addition to literature and research reports, PLCs should have access to professional resources. Principals should take the initial lead in providing PLCs with information from and access to regional, state, and national professional leadership organizations and education associations. When used together, literature, research, and professional resources are effective tools for productive PLCs. These resources are relevant and important to understanding and decision-making because they identify theoretical foundations, provide practical examples of how PLCs may design and implement instructional improvement initiatives, and then explore how to discuss and analyze the outcomes of initiatives.

Consider, for example, how PLCs might use the following information from the 2003 implementation of a PLC in the South Elementary School in Eldon, Missouri, as a way to begin and to practice such dialogue (Rentfro 2007, 2):

- Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) data showed a 24.1 percent gain in advanced and proficient scores for communi-

cation arts between 2001 and 2005; and,

- the percentage of first grade students scoring on grade level on the Developmental Reading Assessment end-of-year test increased 12.2 percent between 2001–2002 and 2006–2007.

One source of data that may be used for other examples can be found at “The All Things PLC” Web site: www.allthingsplc.info/evidence/evidence.php.

Forming Frames of Reference

As PLCs engage in collegial conversations about the results of their explorations; they develop deeper understandings about existing conditions and form frames of reference from which to revisit, reflect on, and perhaps refine their earlier identified instructional beliefs. By weighing their shared experiences, beliefs, and knowledge, PLCs can begin to consider, develop, implement, and assess instructional improvement strategies tailored to their schools’ specific needs. As they focus on the potential of such initiatives for their schools, principals and teachers may better appreciate how, by working together, they can achieve more than the sum of their individual efforts.

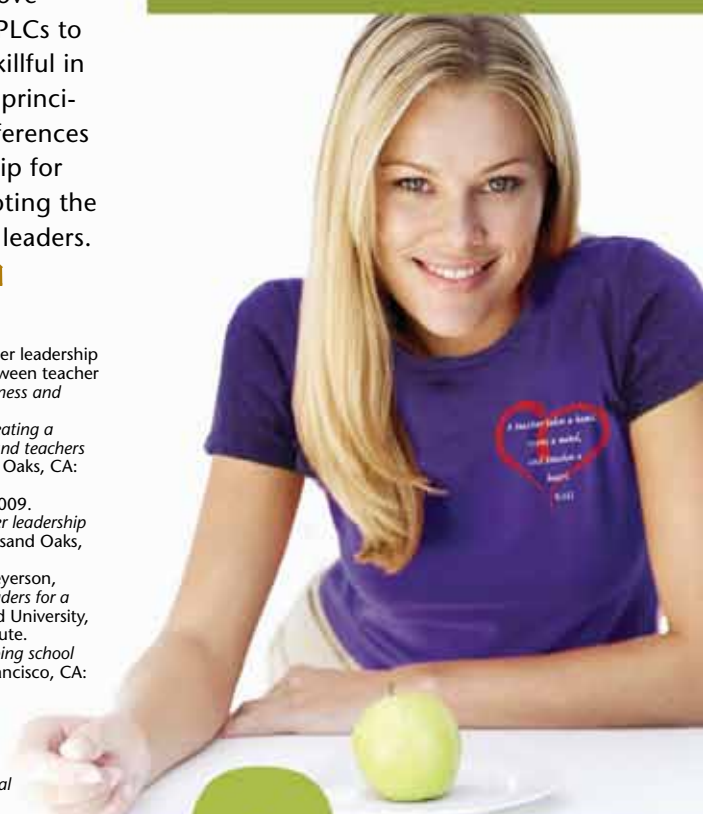
Closing Thoughts

Principals have opportunities to cultivate the growth of PLCs by providing the time for and encouraging the use of collegial conversations. To enhance the effectiveness of PLCs, principals may teach participants how to develop and apply communication and decision-making skills as they identify, agree upon, and address specific instruc-

tional areas in need of improvement. By creating ways for PLCs to engage in and to become skillful in the use of such techniques, principals clearly illustrate the differences between providing leadership for teachers and actively promoting the development of teachers as leaders. It is a powerful message. ■

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